

Becoming Successful at Six Sigma Deployment! How to Make Six Sigma Last?

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ABSTRACT

Over the years Six Sigma has evolved and many creative versions have resulted – Lean Six Sigma, Transactional Six Sigma, and Design for Lean Sigma. Almost everyone in the manufacturing industry has tried or plans to try implementing Six Sigma to achieve near zero defects (3.4 defects per million opportunities).

In spite of all this, most Six Sigma programs never take off as planned or die out after a period of time. Even the places where Six Sigma is being practiced, the organization may never see the financial benefits that were promised!

Six sigma requires a basic shift in the way of thinking about quality. It requires change and managing change can be challenging.

In this white paper we will discuss what needs to be done to make Six Sigma stick so that it becomes “the” way of Quality in the organization. We will list the key steps to implement Six Sigma successfully.

INTRODUCTION

Six Sigma was the biggest quality method of the 1990's. Over the decades it has been losing its charisma and other methods like Lean, Lean Six Sigma, and Transactional Six Sigma have become more popular, leaving Six Sigma behind.

Based on the research by Bain & Company spanning 8,504 respondents over a 14-year period, satisfaction ranking of Six Sigma fell from rank 14 in 2004 to 18 in 2006. Over the period of just 2 years Six Sigma ranking fell 4 points.¹

The matrix below shows usage versus satisfaction ratings of various tools.



Figure 1. Management tools and Trends 2007¹

From the matrix, Six Sigma appears in the low usage/low satisfaction quadrant of the matrix much below Lean operations and other tools.

Yes, it's true that six sigma is slowly losing its flavor. Critics have called Six Sigma to be modified TQM, same old techniques and a new structure (old wine in a new bottle). However, this is the only quality method that linked quality to finances. Six sigma was the first quality method that involved management and used a structured approach. And that made it so popular in the 1990s.

MAIN SECTION

SIX SIGMA - LOOKING BACK IN TIME

Back in the late 1990s every company was jumping onboard the Six Sigma wagon. Because until then, all quality methods that came required quality people to be responsible for improving and maintaining high quality. did not link quality with financials of the company.

Before 1990, Quality and process engineers were the “fire fighters” of the manufacturing world. They continuously fight fires in the plant trying to make sure that only good quality parts reach the customer.

But unlike the actual fire fighters, these quality engineers are no heroes.

This was until Six Sigma showed up.

Quality Engineers were happy to adopt Six Sigma as it brought the promise of structure and accountability.

Managers loved it as Six Sigma promised listening to the Voice of Customer and resolving all customer related issues using a well defined, structured approach called DMAIC (Define-Measure-Analyze-Improve-Control). They could easily manage the six sigma players (black and master black belts) running these improvement projects.

For the first time a quality program linked quality with finances. This was something that got top management interested in six sigma.

Everyone in the company saw Six Sigma making their lives easier...it was a dream come true!

Since there was nothing to lose by using Six Sigma it became popular very quickly. This caused a mad rush of companies trying to get started with Six Sigma in the early 1990s.

But soon these companies realized they needed a fleet of Black Belts, Green Belts and a few Master Black Belts too. Roll out plans were made, experts hired and engineers/staff trained in Six Sigma.

Six Sigma training itself cost companies millions of dollars... initially thought of as an investment that would pay off once results start coming in.

Six Sigma projects were kicked off and DMAIC approach was used almost everywhere. Got to use DMAIC if you want to succeed at Six Sigma, right?

A lot of energy was poured into the initiative. After about 8-9months after kick off, managers demanded results, quality managers expected perfect quality, satisfied customers, top managers wanted hard dollars to roll in. IN reality though improvements were observed here and there, some of them even saving dollars, but results usually are nowhere close to what the initial targets were. However, quality professionals waited patiently for Six Sigma to work its magic.

After a year or so the bubble began to burst. People got tired of the program, started finding faults, actual results were far less than the expectations; processes once improved deteriorated again, same problems kept cropping up time and again. The energy and enthusiasm

began to fade and slowly Six Sigma program begins to die off.

Finally one day Six Sigma program gets discarded.

At this point it's not uncommon to hear comments like Six Sigma wasn't the program for us, our process is unique and so different Six Sigma wouldn't have worked!

Six Sigma doesn't have the tools necessary to sustain improvements.

After thousands of man-hours and millions of dollars are wasted on trying to implement Six Sigma, companies start looking at other programs. Creative versions of Six Sigma began to evolve in the late 1990s. That's when programs like Lean Six Sigma, Transactional Six Sigma, and Design for Lean Sigma started catching up.

While the vast majority struggle trying to take the Six Sigma program off the ground, others have trouble making it stick and get some real savings from the program. But there are a few companies who have gained from Six Sigma. General Electric, 3M, DuPont, Motorola have succeeded in deploying Six Sigma saving them millions of dollars over the past few years.

So what did these companies do different as compared to others?

How did they make Six Sigma stick?

What needs to be done to successfully implement Six Sigma?

Implementing Six Sigma successfully requires deploying the method in three phases A, B and C and following the key steps listed under them.

A) Setting the stage for Six Sigma (Initial deployment)

1) The “when, where and how” of Six Sigma

- Plan for the deployment, visualize the change
- Make sure Six Sigma program has leadership “buy in” and support.
- Involve a few leaders in Six Sigma deployment
- Present a very strong case for Six Sigma as a change initiative that will bring in hard dollars
- Identify your change agents at all levels of the organization – senior management, middle managers, and operational people. Change agents are people who are not afraid of the unknown.
- Tell these change agents “what’s in it for them” if they try out Six Sigma program
- Involve the change agents early on in the game
- Identify the pilot area where Six Sigma will be accepted and tried